

MICHAEL L. MONTELIONE

27th INFANTRY DIVISION, SCHOFIELD BARRACKS

#264

INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 6, 1998
BY JEFF PAPPAS

TRANSCRIBED BY:

CARA KIMURA

NOVEMBER 6, 2000

Jeff Pappas (JP): The following oral history interview was conducted by Jeff Pappas for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial, at the Imperial Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 6, 1998 at five p.m. The person being interviewed is Michael Montelione, who was at Schofield Barracks on December 4, 1941.

Michael Montelione (MM): Seventh, you said fourth.

JP: Sorry, December 7, 1941. Thank you. For the record, would you please state your full name, place of birth and date?

MM: Michael Montelione, my birthday was April 1, 1919, born in Manhattan, New York.

JP: April 1?

MM: April 1.

JP: On April Fools' Day?

MM: That's correct.

JP: Did that ever come back to haunt you during your...

MM: Never.

JP: Anyone ever play any April Fool jokes...

MM: Nah.

JP: ...on your birthday?

MM: Not really. My wife does sometimes.

JP: So you're born in 1919, roughly six months or so after the armistice was signed to end World War I.

MM: Yeah, just about.

JP: And did you go to school in Manhattan, or did your family move from there?

MM: Well, I went to a number of elementary schools in Manhattan. Actually I believe I started school in Brooklyn on Bushwick Avenue, if I remember correctly.

JP: On, I'm sorry, which avenue?

MM: On Bushwick.

JP: Bushwick.

MM: Bushwick Avenue. And that's when I started—I think it was they didn't have a kindergarten then. I believe it was 1A, they called it.

JP: Okay. And do you remember much about your elementary, middle school, or even high school experience in New York?

MM: In Manhattan, in New York, I don't remember too much except that prior to moving to Brooklyn in 1931, I was living on 13th Street, between 2nd and 3rd Avenue, and I was going to a Catholic school, Saint Anne's. It was either on 11th Street or 12th Street, I'm not quite sure.

JP: This was before 1931?

MM: Yeah.

JP: Do you remember much about New York then?

MM: Oh yeah, quite a bit.

JP: What do you remember specifically?

MM: Oh, I remember 14th Street was quite the place. And also they used to have a big store called Klein's on Union Square. They had Horn & Hardarc right down the street from them. And you had some theaters there, the Fox, the Academy. Then down on either side of 30th, you had the Jefferson, RKO Jefferson Theater, but that's closed down now.

JP: Well, you're of Italian descent.

MM: Yes.

JP: Is your mother and/or father Italian?

MM: Yes.

JP: So both are Italian. Are both from Italy? Are they first generation?

MM: Yes, born in Italy.

JP: They came to New York through Ellis Island?

MM: Nineteen fourteen.

JP: Through Ellis Island?

MM: Yes, through Ellis Island.

JP: Now, down around 13th Street then, there had been a Little Italy section growing in New York.

MM: Well, further downtown, around Grant Street, Spring Street, Grant Street, something like that. I'm not too familiar with those streets right now.

JP: Had you had any experience with that community growing up as a child?

MM: No, I had nothing to do with that. The earliest I can remember is when I was living on 1st Avenue, between 105th, 106th Street. And it was at the height of the depression, 1927, '28, in there somewhere, '29.

JP: Well, of course the crash in 1929 and the depression beginning shortly after that. How much do you remember about the depression?

MM: (Coughs) Excuse me. I can't tell you one thing about depression years. You could buy thirty-five bananas for a quarter. Potatoes were going for, like if you bought the whole sack, it was about like half a cent a pound. But of course, you had to have the money to buy it, to begin with.

JP: What were your parents doing at this time for work?

MM: Well, for a while, they wasn't working again. It was tough, yeah.

JP: So, had you gone to high school in New York?

MM: Not in New York. We moved to Brooklyn (coughs)—excuse me—in 1931. That's when—when I went to public school [P.S.] Seventeen in Brooklyn. They called it the Green Point section. (Coughs) Because—(coughs) still got that cold.

(Conversation off mike.)

(Taping stops, then resumes)

JP: So back in 1931, your family had moved from New York from Manhattan to Brooklyn.

MM: Yeah.

JP: You had gone to attend Public School Number Seventeen, in Brooklyn. Did you attend high school in Brooklyn?

MM: Yeah, I went to Boys High School in Brooklyn. I only went for two years. I was sixteen, then I quit.

JP: What did you do after that, after sixteen, you turned sixteen?

MM: Worked, I usually worked with my father. Of course, in those days, immigrants weren't too bright. They didn't go to school in Europe. Well, never mind Europe, I mean in the town they came from. They had no compulsory education, so one of the main jobs they used to do was icemen.

JP: In Europe, Italy, or in New York?

MM: No, in New York, _____ New York.

JP: Well tell me, first of all, let's go back then, tell me about your parents then. Where are they from in Italy?

MM: Puglie, a province of Bari.

JP: Bari, of course, being eastern Italy, part of eastern Italy.

MM: Well, Bari is north of Rome, about 300 miles.

JP: So your parents came from Bari?

MM: Yeah.

JP: And what was your dad's, do you know what your dad's vocation was in Italy?

MM: He worked on the farms, orchards, olives, grape, you know, stuff like that.

JP: He was a laborer.

MM: Yeah.

JP: So he came back to, he came to New York 1914. By 1931, he'd been an iceman, at this time.

MM: Yeah, that's all he ever did.

JP: Tell me about that, tell me about the vocation itself.

MM: Well, it's one of those there jobs that many people make fun of, you know. They say, oh, you're Barese, oh, well, you're an iceman. You know? I say, "Yes, I worked with my father."

And he goes, like I said, they didn't know very much and it was hard for them to go into anything else because they didn't speak, read or write English or Italian, for a matter of fact.

JP: How did they communicate?

MM: With each other. That was my mother and father and my relatives, my uncles, my aunts, you know. They all spoke Italian, they all came from Italy. And but they learned some words from time to time and they learned out how to figure out money and the change and they did all right.

JP: This is right around 1935 now and you finished high school and this is before enlistment?

MM: Nineteen thirty-six, 'cause then I graduated elementary 1934.

JP: Okay. When did you enlist in the services?

MM: Nineteen forty, June 1940.

JP: So basically from after high school, from roughly, oh, 1936...

MM: I bummed around a little while.

JP: Bummed around a while. What'd you just work for your father during that time?

MM: Yeah, and I had some other menial jobs, you know. They're nothing much to speak about. And of course we joined the army, not only I, quite a number of fellows from my neighborhood, they joined the services and because, you know, things were tough. And then you couldn't get any jobs or anything like that. And this might give you a chance to try to make something of yourself in the service.

JP: Was it primarily an Italian neighborhood?

MM: Oh, no. Green Point was primarily Polish.

JP: So many of your friends were Polish?

MM: Yes, Polish.

JP: So did you all get together as a group and talk about joining the armed services?

MM: No.

JP: Was it a collective decision?

MM: No, we never did. Everyone went about it on their own.

JP: And they all joined the army?

MM: Different time. No, some navy, army, Marines.

JP: So you happened, you joined the army.

MM: Joined the army.

JP: Okay, this was 1940?

MM: Mm-hm.

JP: Tell me about that. What was—when you decided, where did you enlist? Did you enlist in Brooklyn?

MM: No, I enlisted over in 39 Whitehall Street in Manhattan. I think it's on—well, downtown, all the way.

JP: Now at this particular time, by 1940, had you heard rumors or talk about the hostilities that were going on in the South Pacific?

MM: I must be truthful, no, I didn't know anything about that.

JP: So you just joined the service?

MM: I just joined the service.

JP: It was a perfect, it was a good opportunity for you?

MM: Yes, to travel and have three meals a day, nice, clean bed, medical treatment and they gave me twenty-one dollars a day, once a month.

JP: Twenty-one dollars a month?

MM: You didn't hear it.

JP: Twenty-one dollars a day, once a month?

MM: That's right. That's my private joke.

JP: So you had some pocket change?

MM: Oh yeah.

JP: Where were you first? Where did you go for basic training?
For recruit training?

MM: That's gotta—right in Hawaii. 'Cause I signed up for Hawaii
and that's where they sent me.

JP: And you were in the infantry unit?

MM: Excuse me?

JP: And you were in the infantry unit there?

MM: Well, originally they assigned me temporarily to I Company,
the 27th Infantry, was called the Wolfhound Regiment. And
that was in the 22nd Brigade.

JP: And you were stationed at...?

MM: In Schofield Barracks.

JP: And that's of course on the island of Oahu.

MM: Right.

JP: And so when did you get over to Hawaii? Was it in 1940 or
early 1941?

MM: I think it was around August of '40.

JP: Okay. What was your first impression of Hawaii, having been from New York, living in the city most of your life, in Brooklyn or Manhattan, what was your first impression of Hawaii?

MM: Beautiful. Fantastic. I was in a different world.

JP: What did you do when you got off that boat? First thing?

MM: Oh god, gee, I can't remember, I can't recall.

JP: Well, what were some of the favorite things that you liked to do in Hawaii, before the attack on Pearl Harbor?

MM: Well, I spent a lot of time practicing radio because I wanted to be a radio operator. And occasionally I went to town and had a few drinks and that's about it.

JP: Did you make any lasting friends there?

MM: You mean Hawaiians?

JP: Well, no, within your unit?

MM: Well, it's hard to say lasting friends because we were all from different parts of the country. It's not like you went over there with a unit, like in the National Guard, like you knew quite a few guys. But we all come from different areas. It was pretty tough to say a good friend. All we know is that we were just soldiers and out to do a job, that's all.

JP: You still had really no inclination about what was going to happen within the next year or so?

MM: No, not until near the beginning of the war, when we went out several different alerts and we knew something was up, that's about it.

JP: Well that was happening, what, a few months prior to the attack...

MM: Anywhere from a month to two months, yeah.

JP: So by this time, though, you're thinking something is going on?

MM: Yeah. But we never even gave it a thought what really was going to happen.

JP: So about ten days though before the attack, you went back to peacetime activity. The alerts had been essentially called off?

MM: Well, not totally. I understand that some of the units, like twenty-five percent or something like that, were out in different positions.

JP: What were you doing at this time, as a profession, with the army? What were you, were you radio contact?

MM: Well, I did learn quite a few phases of communications. The line laying, or stringing up in the trees, learn how to climb with the pole climbers. Different splices learn how to hook up switchboards, operate switchboards. Of course, mainly, I was getting to be a good radio operator, I practiced a lot.

JP: Climbing trees, were you particularly athletic, growing up as a boy in New York.

MM: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

JP: What'd you like to climb?

MM: Well, used pole climbs, you know, it's easy to climb that way.

JP: But you liked athletic stuff, sports, enjoyed sports?

MM: Yeah, I did a little boxing, not much, because the fellows I had to fight were about six inches taller and they had about six inch longer reach than I did. And then so that was not for me.

JP: So you spent most of your time learning your trade.

MM: I did play some basketball, but not much either. Too small.

JP: So now we're about ten days before the attack or so. You had been on, your unit had been put on alert prior to that. You knew something was going on.

MM: Not my, we alerted in the middle of the evening, several times, like about one o'clock in the morning. And you have to roll your packs and get ready to hit the field.

JP: Was that part of a training regimen? Were those actual...

MM: No, those were actual alerts we had.

JP: How long did this go on for?

MM: We had about two of 'em like that.

JP: How long before the attack?

MM: Oh, six weeks, eight weeks.

JP: So obviously the commanding units or the commanding officers had known something was happening or they were preparing you.

MM: Well, I wouldn't know if they knew or not.

JP: Okay, let's go to that morning then. You're looking out over Pearl. I know Schofield you had a difficult visual line to Battleship Row. When did you first learn that the Japanese were bombing Pearl Harbor?

MM: Well, first thing I knew, I was having coffee, second cup of coffee breakfast. There was only Corporal Fisher and myself in the dining room. Everybody else was in bed.

JP: Corporal Fisher?

MM: Corporal Fisher.

JP: Do you have a first name?

MM: No, I don't know his first name. And all of a sudden we hear the explosions. Then we looked outside and there they are, dropping the bombs. First over Wheeler Field and, which is right across the field from us, and then they came over and started strafing, which I was outside by then and I was lucky, I didn't get hit. Very lucky.

JP: So what were you—were you doing anything specifically that morning? Had you been given orders to do something?

MM: Well, they gave me orders to go to the motor pool and get a truck and go to the third engineers—I forgot whether it was to pick up or to deliver a power unit generator.

JP: To where?

MM: I can't remember.

JP: Okay.

MM: All I know is that on the way, I don't know if it was at the end of that there first attack or the second attack, and the bomb dropped about maybe fifty, sixty feet away. And then that was too close for me.

JP: You were on the road at this time, in the truck, delivering the power unit.

MM: Yeah. Yeah.

JP: You don't know where you were going, which direction.

MM: No, I was going to or from the Third Engineers. That's all I remember on that.

JP: Okay. All right. What else did you do during that day?

MM: Oh, well, we got back, when I got back, we put together some stuff and I guess they had it pre-arranged where we had to go. I can't remember exactly. They were—I found out they were building tunnels in the mountains over there. That was overlooking Honolulu, or something like that. I don't know if it was the Pali or something. And I don't believe they were finished and they set up our headquarters out there. These roads from north side going to the mountains were camouflaged, whatever you want to use the correct spelling or pronunciation. And we're working out of the tunnels.

JP: Did you know about these tunnels prior to...

MM: No, I didn't.

JP: This was something that they told you that day?

MM: Yeah.

JP: Who told you?

MM: Well, this is the orders. That's where they took you, you stay with the trucks.

JP: And this is after you had delivered the power unit?

MM: Yeah, this is afterwards, yeah.

JP: So this was sometime in the afternoon or early morning?

MM: Oh, that's hard to say.

JP: These tunnels, describe them for me.

MM: Well, it was a big hole in the wall. That's all I know. It was nothing, nothing specific. There was no equipment in there at all.

JP: But they were moving you to there to do something with these tunnels?

MM: Well, we went in there, number one, to keep on surviving and to keep on communicating with the other outfits, because I was a radio operator. And well, the following day, I was so tired I didn't sleep all night. And they had cots—not cots—mattresses, small mattresses, inside the tunnel. So I just went down there and lay down on one and then later on that afternoon, the following day, I woke up and I had company on either side of me. One was General Tinker, he was an Air Force general. And on the other side of me was Colonel Chadwick. He was the division signal officer.

JP: This is in the tunnel?

MM: Yeah. And then I woke up, there was one on each side of me, sleeping.

JP: So you had a general on one side and the other side...

MM: And a colonel on the other side.

JP: ...colonel on the other side.

MM: I was safe.

JP: Did you talk to them?

MM: No, I left them there.

JP: This was inside the tunnel?

MM: Yeah.

JP: Did you set up any radio equipment when you were there?

MM: Yeah, we had some buzzer phones they called them. It was for—we used hand keys on them. And but that's all we did there. I don't know what else I could tell you.

JP: Well, after, let's say, you had to go someplace after the tunnel.

MM: Oh yes. We went up to some plantation with a big gymnasium and we moved in there. They set up cots. Well, not cots, beds, upper and lower bunks.

JP: What do you remember about this plantation? Was it a pineapple plantation, a sugar plantation?

MM: I think it was a gym for the workers for their recreation, I think it was. I know it was around Aiea or something like that. I'm not quite sure. Overlooking Pearl Harbor.

Well, some time after that, they asked for volunteers for a certain job. One volunteer. So three of us volunteered. I can't remember them. I think Lindbergh was one, Carl Lindbergh. He was in my outfit. And the other fellow I can't remember. And we drew straws and I won, or did I lose? 'Cause I went away to this island, I told you I sailed out of Pearl Harbor and went to this island. I'm with thirty-nine men. We relieved these ANZAC's that were there for about fourteen months.

JP: Let's go back to that. So now we're looking at—is this immediately after the attack?

MM: About maybe two weeks.

JP: Oh, two weeks after.

MM: About two weeks after. Ten days to two weeks.

JP: So by this time you had already had pretty much you'd settled back in.

MM: Oh yeah.

JP: Were you back at Schofield before...

MM: No, no, we never did get back there.

JP: Okay, so you never went back to Schofield.

MM: No.

JP: So where were you located? Were you at this gymnasium for that time?

MM: Yeah.

JP: And you stayed there?

MM: Yeah.

JP: Did you do anything? Did you have any odd jobs that...

MM: Well, we had set up a little radio stations, little dugouts and stuff like that.

JP: So you basically were in communications right there.

MM: Yeah.

JP: What kind of messages would come over? What kind of radio contact did you make?

MM: Gee, I can't remember.

JP: That's okay. But you basically stayed there until you sailed off...

MM: Yeah.

JP: ...for the ANZAC's? Yeah, tell me a little bit about that.

MM: I didn't know where we were gonna go and how. All I know is they took me down to Pearl Harbor, they put me aboard this here ship that was refitted. They put gun ____, and they put some guns on 'em. I don't know if they're four-inch or five-inch guns. And it was a, what they call it, machine shop ship for doing different things for the navy.

JP: Do you remember the name of the ship?

MM: No, I don't.

JP: Okay.

MM: And when we sailed, when we're out a ways, then they had general quarters and we all scooted, standing to, I guess you'd call it. And all of a sudden the guns opened up. They never, they call it a shakedown cruise to check the guns out.

JP: I see.

MM: Yeah. And I was standing right out there one and I didn't know it. And every time it fired, you know, you jumped up and down.

JP: Were you assigned to radio communications at this time?

MM: No, I wasn't doing anything on the ship.

JP: Okay. So you just happened to be on the ship?

MM: That's all.

JP: Heading out of Pearl to pick up...

MM: Going to this island which we never knew about.

JP: You never knew the name of the island.

MM: 'Til we got there.

JP: Until you got there. Did you find out the name of the island?

MM: Yeah, Fanning Island.

JP: Fanning Islands.

MM: It was called Fanning Island. It was then the, they called it Gilbert and Ellis Group. See, they're a group of islands called Gilbert Islands but this is Gilbert and Ellis. I didn't understand that either.

JP: That's okay.

MM: And then you have, you had Palmyra Island, about 225 miles one way. I think that was Marine air base. Christmas Island was another army base, about 225 miles the other way.

JP: Do you remember how much time it actually took you to get out to the island from Pearl?

MM: No, I don't remember. It was about a thousand miles east, southeast, something like that.

JP: Deep in the South Pacific then.

MM: Yeah, yeah.

JP: Any landmarks near those islands that are recognizable? Wake Island, _____.

MM: No.

JP: No.

MM: They're off the other way.

JP: Okay.

MM: Midway and Wake, they're up, yeah, I forget, further west or something. I'm not quite sure.

JP: That's okay. And there you picked up ANZAC's.

MM: No, no, no. They were on the island.

JP: Right.

MM: They were doing their communicating there. Oh, by the way, there was a British cable station over there. That's why they were there for protection and we went there to relieve them. Why, I don't know. You were only a soldier. You take orders, that's all. And that's when I had a nice, big radio station. I got some new equipment and it was really, really good. Communications was about five or six islands, or something like that. And also in communication with Hawaii. That was it for eight months.

JP: For eight months. Looking back now at your...

MM: You used to get hot.

JP: Oh, I bet.

MM: A hundred and thirty degrees. We never had to heat the water for a shower. We had the big water tanks up above open and no heat. The sun heated the water for us for the bath, for showers.

JP: Well, looking back now, fifty plus years after the event, how do you think it has shaped your life, fifty some odd years after?

MM: Well, it's hard to say. All I know is that when I came back I had to go to work. I tried different fields and I finally wound up as a truck driver, trailer driver, truck driver.

JP: Union driver?

MM: With the army, there was no union.

JP: Okay, well, if you were still in service at the time. Okay.

MM: I get out—well, actually I was discharged out of Camp Crowder, out of the hospital on disability. Poor health. I lost twenty-five pounds twice. Once on that island, when we ate fish for twenty-eight days, that we had to catch. And then later on, I can't remember where it was. Oh yeah. I was in New Guinea and I became ill and I was in the hospital for thirty days over there. And I lost another twenty-five pounds. But each time I gained it back.

JP: Well, I think we're going to stop there. That's perfect. I appreciate your time and your story. And thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW